

The Relevance of Digital Infographics in Online Newspapers

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Abstract

In the more developed societies online newspapers have already reached a very high degree of notoriety. The newspaper, besides being a product of the journalistic domain, is also the product of the visual domain. Due to the incorporation of new technologies and of different visual trends, substantial changes in consolidated models of newspaper design have been seen that originated a growth in the importance of the image that the newspaper has in the web. It was from this context that emerged the research described in this article.

An analysis of the technique used in a specific aspect of the essential graphics in this model of communication: infographics, was carried out. To that purpose, a study of infographics in web journalism was performed, in order to determine its essential elements.

Keywords: Infographics, Online Newspapers, Communication, Design, Cyber Journalism

Introduction

The growing incorporation of digital infographics can be easily inserted as a part of the mechanism for changing the paradigm of communication as has been observed in recent years. The way in which the reader consumes information and the demands for a fast and efficient communication have led to the identification of the following factuality: *“Every day, every hour, maybe even every minute, we’re looking [at] and absorbing information via the web. We’re steeped in it. Maybe even lost in it. So perhaps what we need are well-designed, colourful and – hopefully useful charts to help us navigate”* (McCandless, 2009: 6).

The new challenges, which specifically emerge from the field of journalism, impose information communication models that are more appealing and effective. These demands were boosted by the appearance of online communication mirroring a reality, which is eager for new dynamics. The visualization of information profits from the potentialities of the use of

multimedia, interactivity, hypertext and infographics. All these elements are relevant when it comes to conveying news but in the scope of the present investigation we are interested in rendering infographics as a visual component of information autonomous.

Henceforward, in this investigation, in order to better understand the current context of infographics, there is a need to approach the concept of infographics, to address its relevance in cyber journalism and to foresee its potentialities.

An approach to the concept of infographics

According to Cairo (2008), infographics, in a definition that we see as all-inclusive and always up to date, is a diagrammatic representation of data; that is, any information presented in the form of a diagram is infographic. Similarly, Valero Sancho (2001) points out that press infographics is an informative contribution carried out by means of iconic and typographic elements that allows or facilitates the understanding of events, actions, news or some of their most significant aspects, and accompanies or substitutes for the information text.

Infographics represents a spatial unit that applies the combination of iconic and verbal codes to represent wide and precise information, for which the verbal discourse would be a more complex medium and would need more room (Colle, 2004). The use of graphic elements, from which genetically infographics emerges, provides a more immediate and at times interactive way of communicating. Generally speaking, infographics can be regarded as a visual element composed of charts, maps, diagrams and images that help the understanding of the content of a base text. This statement, however, does not correspond to an absolute truth since the infographic element may sometimes dispense with a text.

Regardless of the accepted concept, it seems to us that the most relevant issue in terms of the present investigation is to emphasize infographic elements as a graphical representation of information and not merely as a result of computer graphics, namely computer generated image. Moreover, despite the absence of a single meaning, we cannot lose track of the fact that infographics aim is always to facilitate the understanding of facts, processes and data (Holmes, 2002), (Valero Sancho, 2001), (Cairo, 2008). As Santaella (2008) adds, contemporary infographics must be seen in the light of the post-photographic paradigm.

Infographics and Cyber journalism

The relevance of infographics

One should always bear in mind the fact that we can find graphics that, due to the existing similarities, can be confused with infographics and

which also allow for communication in journalistic fields. There is some degree of confusion between infographics and concepts such as drawing, graphics, design, computer graphics, multimedia, graphic fantasy, illustration and pagination, among others. According to Valero Sancho (2001) we can reinforce the idea that, by definition, infographics is a product of a digital publication, which is displayed in a section presenting interactive graphics, infographics, multimedia or just graphics.

Starting from the idea that infographics is based on image and text but may also cover other elements that influence the process of visual information, it is important to analyse which characteristics of infographics associate it with journalism. Possessing a broad visual component focused on the image, infographics conveys information that has a multidirectional span.

In this sense, infographics seems to be "of a different category because it is more visual and less literary than the others (categories); notwithstanding, it also intends to totally or partially transmit a piece of information" (Valero Sancho, 2001: 26).

In the attempt to find the connectivity between journalism and infographics, Valero Sancho (2001: 21) indicates eight characteristics of journalistic infographics, adding that they are essential for the infographic element not to lose its connection with the journalistic domain:

- To have a complete and independent meaning;
- To provide a reasonable amount of present-day information;
- To contain enough information for a clear understanding of the facts that are being reported;
- To establish a certain hierarchy of content using, if need be, typology alternatives;
- To use iconic elements that do not distort reality;
- To perform functions of synthesis or complement of the information presented in text;
- To respect certain aesthetic principles;
- To be clear and precise.

From the aforementioned characteristics, we wish to emphasize the need for infographics to embody any given content in a rigorous and objective way, making use of the visual elements as a means to an end and not as an end in itself. The infographic element can in no way alter the facts or hyperbolize a piece of information.

It stands as obvious that infographics is a separate category, as it is more visual and less literary than other categories, although it also intends to narrate – entirely or partially – a piece of information.

As far as we are concerned, the added value which cyber journalism may draw from infographics can be related to the accomplishment of the informative function through a presentation of facts that enhance aesthetics

and interactivity. The infographics present in cyber journalism allow for the user to trace an autonomous path provided by multimedia, interactivity and hyper textuality. Interactivity, as a possibility which is given the reader to modify a limited path through the “forward” and “back” and “hyperlink” navigation buttons (Cairo, 2008), is one of the most distinctive features of cyber journalism.

Having stated the relevance of the infographics in the field of journalism it is worth noting its pertinence in the digital platforms and more specifically in cyber journalism.

Digital infographics

Digital infographics is a product that derives from the infographics of the printed press but it must show specific properties and new communicative formats that allow for the performance of actions of a different type. As Valero Sancho (2001) mentions, we must interpret digital infographics starting from scratch but always bearing in mind the printed press as a reference. However, it should be considered a separate product, which maintains all the essential characteristics of the printed press infographics although carried out with technological processes. This means that it is presented on distinct media but distributed differently and read / consulted in another way.

Digital infographics distinguishes itself from other communicative products with similar characteristics in various details, for example, those known as non-informative. We can thus, distinguish infographics from other resources that are not built with the intention of disclosing information and that relate mainly to didactics and, to a lesser extent, to publicity or other disciplines.

The potentialities of infographics for cyber journalism are endless when compared to its use in paper format, namely the versatility of application and the interactivity that they offer. Then again and at the same time, infographics of cyber journalism facilitates the understanding of reality by means of time and format economy, since it can function as a text complement or substitute.

In digital infographics we can consider two states: static, when there is no movement; or dynamic, as soon as there is some sort of animation. As for the degree of interaction, users can be considered passive or active. The user is considered to be passive, for example, when he only attends a given presentation without any intervention whatsoever, for example in the case of slides or continuous animation, or active when he needs to intervene manipulating the infographics in some way.

Nowadays, in addition to the static infographics present in both digital and analogical format, journalism also uses infographics composed of

dynamic contents that allow access to a large amount of information in a very short timeframe. Dynamic infographics also allow the user to visualize the contents in the order that interests him most.

In dynamic infographics, information is progressively presented, in a linear sequence, using animations and videos and, in a non-linear sequence, with interactive mechanisms that allow information to be selectively presented, based on the user's choices.

To the extent that static infographics was already used in the printed press, it is important to enhance the use of dynamic infographics with the evolution of technology or the adaptation to new journalistic platforms.

Technology and infographics

We must stress that the basic foundations of the creation of infographics continue to be equal to other visual products (the printed press), for example, the designs are similar but with more aesthetic display and more abundantly so, but nothing new has been created that did not exist previously in the history of visual products. Meaning that we are dealing with a product that if, on the one hand, is similar to existing others on the other hand it has its distinctive features.

However, technological developments and technical changes have altered the way of communicating and the possibilities of message variation. It can be thus said that from their origin, infographics were products of difficult execution with manual procedures and lithographic transformation during the prepress, which made the process of their insertion in the printed press difficult. It's obvious that the emergence of the computer has made it possible to streamline infographics with daily contents, which, in the long run, allowed for the aesthetic display and the incorporation of other new contents that would not have been previously worked infographically.

The interactive tools and techniques laid into digital infographics can be used to tell stories, and thus serve both linear and non-linear narrative forms, giving the user the choice to map out his/her own query path.

As stated by Valero Sancho (2001), the technology of the moment can restrain what one can or cannot do with respect to the way of performing a drawing. A piece of information can become more or less relevant simply due to the fact of having a single colour or not, using some graphics rather than others, using photography or not, or resorting to some special texts. Valero Sancho (2001: 557) states that the graphic design scholar Professor Ricard Giralt Miracle wrote in the prologue to Ivins Jr., (1975):

"Each medium conditions the information in a certain way. It is still a reduction filter that marks and outlines the released messages. (...) Printed press, before and after photography deceive the eye, despite knowing how to

flatter and caress its retina, they steal part of the reality that can only be achieved through direct contact between sender and receiver.”

We can conclude that despite facilitating certain tasks and speeding up the way we work, technology also greatly affects the way we communicate. In digital publications, infographics once more take a new and important leap forward, since it offers more possibilities of adaptation and narration of events, actions or things.

The most common way of implementing digital infographics has been created through different programming languages, namely JavaScript, JQuery, HTML 5 and CSS 3, as well as ActionScript, which continues to be used with some degree of consistency. The interactivity placed in infographics makes it become more effective than just the utilization of text. The added value of an infographic is always noteworthy in the sense that it is a visual creation tailor made to fit a given content. However, this does not imply that infographics can only be used in a single context. The infographics of cyber fields are minimum but versatile units to be used in multiple contexts without losing their original interpretation. Therefore, the applications of infographics vary from simple reference information until it becomes a single piece of information in itself.

Conclusion

Infographics offers the reader and the journalist countless possibilities that deserve to be explored. If, some years ago, journalistic infographics corresponded to the use of text, images and illustrations on paper, today its capacity has been extended by means of the digital format.

Infographics that use videos, audios, animations, maps and graphics allow us to flag the difference between the potentialities of the same resource in paper format and online. Above all, it is the interaction which defines the ineffaceable element of the current circumstance of cyber journalism supported by the infographic component.

It can be stated that infographics, more specifically, dynamic infographics, already has a considerable weight in cyber journalism. However, we are still working by means of transposing static infographics designed for printed press editions to the digital media. This static resource offers little potentialities in the network and does not exploit all the technological resources.

However, the fact that there already are a considerable number of infographics with various resources such as maps, graphics, texts, videos, audios, drawings, photography and, on the other hand, the existence of itineraries of free reading of the information, can be seen as an evolution in terms of infographics production in journalism.

The evolution is no longer accelerated, due mainly to technical limitations and to the time required to produce an infographic, which is always much more time-consuming than putting a text and an image online. A dynamic and interactive infographic summons the efforts of different professionals, which is unfettered by the immediacy of information so distinctive of cyber journalism.

Henceforth, a paradox seems to be built up: dynamic infographics have their scope of application quintessentially in cyber journalism as all the multimedia resources are enhanced; at the same time, dynamic infographics display difficulties in articulating with the fast pace of online news publishing.

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